

USING SPACE ELEVEN



Using Space is a zine about squats, social centres and alternative ways of living. You can pick up paper copies at various infoshops and free pdfs of previous issues on internet sites including archive.org, squat.net and cobblebooks.wordpress.com.

In this issue (number 11) we reprint an interview with a squatter from Rotterdam in the Netherlands in 2016.

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Interviewer (I): Let's just start with the introduction then. So, basically... Can you tell me about yourself?

L: In what sense?

I: Well, for example... How did you start with squatting? Let's start with that one.

L: I got into squatting in England, in London. I was a student and I started going to tekno parties – free parties – in squats. And this was in the late 1990s. And after the Criminal Justice Act, which was designed among other things to eliminate raves, the scene had sort of gone underground. And then, when I started going to parties, it was kind of resurging. So they were pretty huge parties, like, thousands of people. It was the beginning of acidtekno. There were still some kind of hard tekno people around, but most had left to Europe. So for me it was a really exciting time actually. And through that I kind of met squatters and then when I left university ... And in the 1990s, it's way worse now, but even so: apartments were really expensive. So if I wanted to carry on living in the way that I had without subsidized student accommodation, then an option was to squat. Because at this point I was just kinda DJ-ing sometimes at parties. You know, I didn't really want to have a 9 to 5 job to earn the money, to pay the rent and then that would be my life.

And I'm really lucky that I've always kind of found my way around that in different ways. So actually squatting was an attractive option, just so I could stay in London. And in that time, Hackney – which is now extremely gentrified – was still possible to squat. Like, just like in the Netherlands, the glory days were the 1980s. You had like squatted estates, like hundreds of people squatting. Those days had already gone, but there was still squatted social centres. A lot of my friends were squatting... So I kind of got pulled into this alternative scene and I was really happy with that. And then having sort of... Yeah, I think it's hard to start squatting cause you have to know people and it's just kind of an alternative system that you have to learn how everything works. So having got into that, basically through music, then I was kind of in that. And then at a certain point I ended up squatting in the Netherlands and I was squatting here again. And periods of my life I have also rented. When I moved back to the Netherlands my first option was to squat, and luckily we are... This is here for something like 18 months, a bit more now. I think we squatted it in 2014. And it was the third place that I tried to squat, the other two didn't really work out.

I: This is the first?

L: Third. When we were looking for something we tried to squat an industrial building, but when we got inside it was completely water damaged. I tried to squat... and the group was always changing. With some other people, we were talking about squatting and not doing it and actually I'm pretty glad. You know, looking back to it I'm really glad I didn't end up with that specific bunch of people. But then a guy that-, two guys that I was hoping to live with had gone on and squatted on their own. Because they had been living together for already 15 years, last 5 just the two of them in squats.

And then they got evicted in a really horrible way: the owner just came and put their stuff on the street 2 weeks after they squatted it. So they thought they were good by that point. They thought the owner was abroad, but he came back or whatever. So they were suddenly on the street. So they wanted to squat and then we squatted this place with 4 people.

I: So, just for the total image then... You moved to Holland when?

L: I moved to Holland in something like 2003. And then I was squatting here until 2008. Although right in the end I actually got a sort of anti-squat kind of deal. We had this squatted social centre in Rotterdam and when that was evicted we said: give us, if we leave nicely, give us some flats to live in. And I was paying like a hundred euros a month for this one person flat that was like a pretty good deal. And, yeah, so then I was living in England for 5 years and then I moved back here. Something like 2014...

I: And then you squatted this?

L: Yeah, then I ended up here.

I: Alright, so... As far as squatting in the Netherlands goes... What kind of experiences... It's kind of a weird question to me, to ask you like: "what are your highlights?" Like, can you mention some squatting experiences that you've had in this country that really stood out to you?

L: Sure. I'm English, so you could say I'm kind of outside of the scene. And the thing is I kind of like that position, but I also feel like I'm part of the scene and the movement, because of course I've been living here for a certain period of time and therefore I know people in different places and I've gone on different

squat actions. And, yeah, it's hard to... Every squat is sort of exciting to be a part of. But there's definitely one action that I liked. Do you know dominee Visser?

I: Uhm...

L: This guy who's involved with the Pauluskerk. I think he's sort of retired now, but he's this sort of advocate for the homeless.

I: Yeah, I have an idea.

L: Alright, so somewhere around 2008 the city of Rotterdam was doing these plans to sort of just squeeze the homeless completely out the centre. You know, no more junkies... They wanted to put everything on the outside. So they wanted to close down the Pauluskerk and to put some facilities on the edge of the city. Because the Pauluskerk is like on the Westersingel, really in the centre.

I: Yeah, and it was the main place for homeless people to go to, right?

L: Yeah, so... This is obviously a really long story, but dominee Visser was kind of fighting the municipality trying to keep the Pauluskerk in the centre. And then the Pauluskerk... There had been a Holiday Inn hotel, which was briefly squatted, and then that was demolished and then they built these really horrible new yuppy buildings on the Westersingel. And they put the Pauluskerk on the other side of the street, in a sort of temporary building. And then they basically said this is it, you're not going to get a new building. And then dominee Visser said like "okay, if you do that we will squat another building for ourselves." So he came to us, like, you know, the kraakspreekuur, the small amount of political squatters in Rotterdam at that time, and said "will you help me squat a

building?" So we said "yeah, of course." That's like a really great opportunity to put politics into practice. In Rotterdam you don't really often see so many chances to do things like this, so everyone was really excited about it. And then we squatted a building on the Delftseplein, which is just next to the central station: you've got the big building, this office building, which I think is now offices with a fitness club on the ground floor. Then you've got a building which is now yellow and then you've got behind it this sort of hip and trendy new shit... Like the bars, the Annabel and the Biergarten ... So the building is now painted yellow and is actually empty now I think. And they've like bashed a hole through it so you can walk through the building to get to the funky town area. This building we squatted with quite a big group of people, like 50/60 people. So that's also like totally bizarre for Rotterdam standards to have that many people in a squat action. And some people broke the door and just kind of like ran away, which is pretty strange, so me and this guy were just kind of tinkering on the lock thinking we should probably get a lock on the door, right? And then these cops came and started just kind of walking towards us. So we thought "this isn't very good". And then dominee Visser just kind of came with a chair, sat down and started getting interviewed by the media - just kind of talking about the action - as this was happening. So the police couldn't do anything, cause they can't just hit people for no reason on camera. We fixed the lock. We were suddenly friendly with all the homeless people of Rotterdam, that was really cool. So it was really this nice week of everyone getting on, having fun in this new building. And after a week the municipality folded and just kind of said "okay, the Pauluskerk can stay in the centre." And now, actually, as part of the plans: where the Holiday Inn was on the Westersingel they knocked down the hotel, built the yuppy-flats, but the Pauluskerk is in this new building right in the centre.

So, I was talking about it with a friend the other day and that was really like a success story. Not to claim any sort of huge victory for the squatter's movement, but in a small scale way we were asked for help, so we didn't just sort of parachute in and say, like, you know, "we're squatters, we're going to help you with something." People asked for help, we did what we did and actually it was like a victory in a whole huge struggle. For me that's a really good action. Yeah, I'm still really happy that that went so well, basically.

I: Well, alright. Before we move on to the actual subject – and I know you already kind of mentioned it – but could you shortly state what your motivations are? Your personal motivations to squat?

L: Yeah... That's actually quite difficult. This is a really... It's gonna be hard to give you a short answer on this, cause that's... I think for me-, I don't really... Since I became politically aware, maybe 16 or 18, I'd be really saddened by the way that people live in society and how we interact with each other and how... yeah, the global picture is unfolding, but also how people just treat each other on a sort of local, basic level. So I've always wanted to detach as much from these sorts of things as possible. And I already mentioned this kind of trap of earning money to pay the rent. And I came from privileged middle class background, so it's not that I was squatting cause I was desperate for a house and had no other option. That's not true. But I was still squatting because I wasn't prepared to pay the amount of money that I would've had to, if I were to carry on living in the area of London that I wanted to live in. And attached to that, so then you can identify that as need perhaps, but attached to that is also definitely a political aspect. Which is that I see squatting as direct action against capitalism. It's like freeing yourself from the trap of paying rent, basically. And also it's always been like a

moral thing to me as well. I just don't think a building should stand empty and I'm really always surprised that they do. And I'm also really fascinated to explore, to go on and explore buildings. I really love dereliction-, just to see it. But I also want to put those derelict buildings back to use. I've always kind of had that feeling as well, so it's a very complex issue for me. But it's also... In some way I feel part of the squatter's movement, because that's an identity. It has a lot of values to it that I can attach to. And then you can also criticize the squatter's movement for being many things; white middle class, macho sometimes... Yeah, I can definitely be critical of people I see around me. I don't think being a squatter makes you suddenly immune to all of society's problems. But at the same time I also see a lot of amazing, interesting people in the squat scene who are choosing actively to live in a different way for loads of reasons. Personally, I'm lucky that I'm not squatting because I was driven into homelessness or because my parents threw me out for my sexuality or something like that. Because I definitely know people, you know, people who were attacked and in the hospital and lost their job and then were forced on the street... I haven't had that. But still, everyone chooses to do what they do. So for me it's been a choice to squat. And I think that's probably one very good reason why I am in the Netherlands. Another would be the friends that I have here. But one is that it's possible to squat a building even now, despite criminalization. Despite maybe what most people think. You can squat a building and be there for three years, you know? Because in England you can squat a building and be there for three months.

I: Tops?

L: Not tops, but you'd have to be very lucky. You really have to be lucky. Three months is basically the time

for them to go to court and get you evicted. That's basically the cycle. Or you get illegally evicted. Which of course can happen here as well, but if you have the luck here then you can squat a long time. And you have people around you who also are squatting. That's also nice.

I: Well cool, you actually gave the most understandable answer to that question. To a lot of people, I've noticed they perceive it as a very complex thing to express their motivations, why they squat and all that kind of stuff. But at the same time they all say it's really natural. It's like close to yourself to make that decision to squat. And I think you actually put that into words really nicely. Which already brings me to the next question; how would you say your motivations relate to other squatters'? Are there a lot of differences?

L: That's another good question. I think squatting is a tool to achieve housing goals, but also political objectives. Also kind of cultural objectives. I definitely don't share solidarity with all squatters. There are people from the tekno scene who were rejected by the tekno scene, which is already quite impressive. That they could be rejected by an apolitical group. And these people are just squatting buildings and stealing copper and having month long parties until they get evicted. And that's just really stupid. It's actually really terrible that they're kind of wasting the possibilities that they might have. Just to stay and do a party twice a year, or whatever. I don't know, I don't think you need to survive by stealing copper. You can also survive in other ways. I think they're really stupid to... Yeah, it's not like I think all squatters are wonderful or something, but I also feel solidarity with people. Because with most squatters you can have a conversation about how it's a shame the buildings empty, almost definitely they're not going to agree

with whatever the mainstream politicians are saying, almost definitely they're left wing – whatever that means. Yeah I kind of moved into a world where most of my friends are kind of rejecting a lot of mainstream values and, even if they wouldn't call themselves anarchists – because, what does that mean, you know? That means so many things, so many people and it's not like many people really read anarchist theory. But even so: mutual aid, cooperation, solidarity. I see these things in the people around me. So in that way I have a lot of connection. But then also, I'm sort of living here in the countryside. A bit isolated. So it's not like I'm living in a big squat with loads of people, but then I've also lived for example on the industrial estates of Rotterdam. In a sort of collective with people, artists, people doing tekno parties... And that was also quite fun. So, I don't know, I mean, I see people doing different things with squatting -- this tool that they have available. But also people take it in a really different way. And of course, at least until criminalization, squatting was just a way to provide yourself with cheap housing – or yeah, almost free housing. Pay your bills and then, that's kind of it. You don't get trouble from anyone. So of course there's also a lot of people doing that, but then it's also... It goes round and round. Maybe people weren't political when they started squatting, but if you squat for a few years and you see police violence... You can see infoshops and whatever. You go to gigs, you meet people. Then you kind of become part of this thing. And the other way around is people really want to be part of it and then they start squatting... So you know, it goes round and round I think.

I: And in the end everyone just kind of has that thing in common?

L: Somehow, yeah. You're somehow bonded. I mean, if I heard about a squat being evicted... If I could get there, then I would go down to help. I wouldn't have to know the people. And some friends I know are more cage-y and that's mostly from bad experiences. My kind of feeling would be... I guess with most people I'm kind of suspicious of them until I've met them and spoken to them. But if someone had said that they're squatters then that would be one way... A way for me to already be favourable to them. I might change my mind once I have met them of course, but then obviously it has some really strong value for me.

I: Nice. So yeah, political opportunities. I can imagine that you already have an idea of what I mean when I mention political opportunities, but it comes from this sociological theory that you have... Like, within a country you have an established political structure and then social movements are using their political opportunities to influence that structure. So how I'm trying to approach your perspective on the political opportunities of the squatting movement... I'm basically trying to figure out like what are your experiences with how you can influence that establishment, so to say. And one thing I'm wondering about is, the moments that would come up in your mind when I mention that kind of thing. Do you mostly experience it as a repression kind of thing? Do you think there are also possibilities for concessions or for agreements to be made? Like, what kind of shape does the dynamic mostly seem to take?

L: That's interesting, because I have this really strong feeling that - and again, maybe it's because I come from... It's another privilege that I come from a background where, when I grew up on the streets, there weren't like neo-nazis who wanted to attack me because I had blue hair. I didn't grow up in repressive, hostile environments. I've always lived in fairly

tolerant places. So I'm lucky in that way, but I really hate this feeling of like... When you go to Berlin and everyone's talking about "repression" and "solidarities." And it kind of breeds this thing where you're kind of fighting the police to get revenge. And to me it feels really like kids fighting against the fathers... Like, even people with good intentions are getting locked in this battle against patriarchy and for me-, I have this more autonomous feeling. Like, I want to step aside from it. And that doesn't mean I don't want to fight or help people fighting. I definitely don't believe that repression doesn't exist, I just don't think that it's constructive to look at it head on. I also think it's really important to think tactically. So, behave in a certain way but don't necessarily believe it. So for example: with this squat, I'm like a good squatter. I don't piss off the neighbours, I'm gardening, I say hello to the people on the street. You know, I was weeding outside in front of the house the other day because they mowed the grass and I was like "ah, maybe it would be nice if I do that as well." So I'm like doing these tropes. That would make me seem as a good squatter. But politically, I think I'm very far away from my neighbour or the people that I am in a way trying to impress. But for me that's fine, because I can present this image and then I can just live here and do whatever the fuck I want. If I was gonna go to court in the UK, I'd wear a suit and tie. Because I'm white, I'm middle class. If they see me there in a suit and tie they're going to have assumptions. If I'm going there wearing like loads of punk patches and a Mohawk, then the judge is going to judge me. So, I guess I'm kind of using my privilege in a way that works for me and I think everyone should do that in a way that works for them, in whatever way they can. So then there's, like, your essential identity, you could say, and your strategic aims and tactics for how to get what you want to. I'm quite lucky that I can use them to my advantage, in a way. So I'd much rather be busy

with that. And then at the same time I'm also really cynical, so I don't think squatting is gaining me any concessions or something like that. I don't think the squatter's movement has ever really benefited from negotiating in the sense of having an aim and then trying to negotiate with the state to get it. I think the squatting movement has always benefited from being wild and unruly and kicking off when necessary at big evictions or in street riots, whatever. And that power is what the Dutch squatting movement has been basically coasting on since the 1980s and has now really been chopped away at recently by the end of 'gedogen' [the policy of tolerance by which illegal things can be ignored if they do no harm eg coffee shops illegally buying in marijuana to sell legally] and the criminalization of squatting. But this kind of social imaginary, in which squatters were like good people who repaired buildings and lived there... That's the one side. But also they fought to protect their buildings, that is the other side. That's really important. And that would be the way that I would see the squatting movement kind of taking it's opportunities. But I don't see that as asking for concessions, because... I'm not someone that particularly enjoys negotiating with the state or something. It's good that people can legalize buildings here. That's really good. If you'd talk to squatters from Spain they'd be totally against legalization processes and such. But I find that fascinating, because it's just simply not possible here. If you want to survive for 30 years in a squat, you're going to have to legalize in some form. But that's okay, because then you can have an awesome social space like ORKZ or Vrankrijk or Grote Broek or Poortgebouw or Binnenpret or ACU. That's okay. These places, to me, are still radical. And Spanish anarchists could say like, you know, "but they pay rent." Yeah sure, so the Spanish anarchist should try to set up an anti-establishment squat here and see how long it lasts for. Whereas in Barcelona you have

places that have been squatted 30 years ago, that are militantly anti-establishment, militantly antagonistic. And they're still there and they get raided sometimes by the police, but the police can't actually evict them because the owner has to ask the police to evict them. It's really bizarre, right? But I think it kind of comes as a flip from fascism being powerful. Now there's these kind of safeguards that the police can't have too much power.

But then here, if the owner of my squat, the local council, want to evict, then they can. If I like do a loud party here, the municipality can decide that I'm not conducive to the wellbeing of the area and then I'm fucking gone.. the mayor, the prosecutor and the cops can simply all agree it would be better for public order if the place was evicted. Which is totally fascist by the way. And then, yeah, you've got these squats in Barcelona which just exist, because the owner – for whatever reason – doesn't want to evict them. So you have to take the opportunities which exist in your local environment. And I think squatters are quite aware of that. That's why the squatting movement kind of persists. The situation always changes, the political situation. Definitely it is getting worse, but at the same time there's still plenty of empty buildings. And squatters are good at occupying empty buildings and holding on to them. So, yeah... I think maybe I should stop there.

I: [Laughter & Chatter] The other day a guy told me something that kind of headed in the same direction as what you were saying, that in the end, to the squatting movement politics are just irrelevant. Because the best thing that can happen to you is just that people around you are okay with it and that politics and government officials just stay away from you.

L: I think that's a nice way of putting it. Because, yeah sure, maybe GroenLinks [green mainstream political party] could say "we support this squat." And that's good, until it's not good and the right wing people just say "these people have to go."

I: That's what he said as well. He said the youth parts of the parties are mostly for squatting but then the main parties are actually just against it. Like, you can have the youth socialists and they're for squatting, but then the actual socialist party isn't.

L: Which just shows that it's fucking bullshit, right? I mean, squatters seem to be some of the only people who actually realize the bullshit and then just go ahead and do something. They don't try to change the system from within and then get given a youth centre. They just squat a youth centre and just, like, "hey, we got a youth centre, let's go do stuff." I really respect that point of view, because we're living in a situation where we could have a lot of power, right? All you need is a group of people to do stuff and then you can decide what you want. You could live in an area and decide that police can't enter. If everyone agrees, you could enforce that. But we all kind of live individually and in some way under the thumb. And I really like it that squatters just kind of take action, because everything else is stacked against you, but then you can just do it. And then people have to negotiate with you, I guess.

I: Alright, so there's an interesting one. How much chance do you think... Do you think that in the modern day context, the squatting movement still gets as much room to express itself? In a way. And to do what it wants to do? Do people still react to it the same? Do they still get the same amount of room, or is everyone immediately just like "nah, I'm not gonna do that. Get out."

L: Yeah, you're asking me questions where I think every different day you'd ask me, you'd get quite a different answer. There's definitely levels to what you're saying. We're definitely, you know, we, everyone, are living in a very different age to the 1980s, 1990s or even the 2000s. Cities are gentrifying. The mainstream media was always hostile to counter-cultural things, but now the stereotypes are so much stronger and there isn't... There is alternative media on the internet, but not print versions. You know, there's no left wing newspapers like Vrije Volk anymore. So I think we're living in an age where there's plenty of choice. Of course, capitalism gives you choice. But still you have these kind of dominant attitudes being really replicated and reinforced. And I see, for example with 'gedogen' [tolerance], you see the changes. Like, the Dutch government wants to get rid of coffee shops and there's all this legislation going against it. Like... Do you know Dilan Yesilgoz? She's this really horrible PVV local council member in Amsterdam. And every time people squat, then she says like "why is this happening? Squatting's illegal, a rule is a rule and we have to evict these people now. Arrest them." And apparently she's like the daughter of Turkish communists, so she says stuff like "don't tell me about struggle, I know what struggle is." I don't know so much about her, I just really hate her for her comments I sometimes read in the media. But it seems like she's just assimilated really badly into what this really horrible Dutch intolerant person can be, or something. So she's in a power position, just saying "gedogen [tolerance] is over, fuck this shit, we need to implement the law." Which is of course pretty nazi actually. So you've got all of that shit going on, but then on another level... Like, my neighbour is a security guard. That's one of his jobs: he is a security guard. But I met him in a good way and he's also a landscape gardener. He actually likes it that I'm gardening here. He gives me gardening tips, he

showed me his garden this morning. We were talking about how everything gets killed by slugs and how the weather is fucked up this year. So we've got this deep personal connection and he's written letters to the municipality saying that I shouldn't get evicted. He wants to do it again and I'm saying to him "no, let sleeping dogs lie." So we're actually friends and that's great. And I would help him out, he would help me out. So we forged a personal connection. And who knows what he thought about squatters before. Maybe he used to squat, I never asked him. He's living in this house for 30 years, who knows. But the point is: there's the level of personal interaction with the people around you and the people who say "oh, it's great you squatted this place, I'm really happy someone finally did it." And then this battering in the media. Which is of course not completely one-sided, because you still... In the Netherlands you still have the idea of the squatter, which you don't really have in the UK, as someone who does good things and looks after a building. And yeah, he or she is militant, but the militancy is justified in some way and understandable to people. So that still exists. And, you know, Hans Pruijt [sociologist] did a survey - I think before criminalization it was 50/50 whether people thought squatting should be criminalized. And of course it depends how you ask the question, stuff like that. That was kind of interesting, because in England it was more like... 70 percent said it should be criminalized, 30 percent not... Something like that. I can't remember exactly, but it was a much bigger differential. So I've also watched films from squatters in the 1990s and they said "it's so much harder to squat nowadays." So maybe everyone always says that it's harder than it was. But I think, still the possibilities exist. But I think there are changes. I was gonna say it seems kind of unlikely to me that you'd see favourable media stories in the mainstream media, but actually there are some still.

I: Yeah, I happen to know of a media message from the recent squatting activity in Gouda. They actually wrote an article which one of the squatters was calling “a really good, old school article.” Because they just stated the facts like they were and they actually went pretty hard on the police. Because the police had broken in, they went through the window, they took the dogs, the neighbourhood wasn’t happy about it, and all that kind of stuff. The building had been empty for ages. There was a burglary of a shop going on around the corner, while the police decided to go into the squat. So you have all that kind of stuff. The newspaper’s just like “why the hell did this happen”, you know?

L: Yeah, and that’s something about Dutch culture that means it’s still possible to say that.

I: The impression I get is that it happens more on a local level though. On a national level there’s a really clear message, like, squatting is just illegal and large scale media just takes that and works with that. Like, squatting is just illegal and then they just kind of put them inside that context, I have the idea. But then you have these weird situations where you have all this media coverage about de Vloek being evicted in the Hague for example. But then at the same time all these people from de Vloek are like “but yeah, we had hundreds of customers a week, people coming to the restaurant, for dancing classes, for concerts, for work.” And you have all these people from the neighbourhood saying that they actually liked it a lot and “we don’t even need a new sailing centre, so why is it being evicted?” You know, that kind of stuff. That’s also what I recognize a bit in what you’re saying.

L: Definitely, and that’s the thing. It’s really complex, though. Because, you know the eviction of the Slangpand, or Tabakspanden, in Amsterdam? So that

was evicted, then resquatted and then partied. And there was a big riot on the street. Evicted again, people got arrested. I thought it was a bit of a dumb action in some ways, because it was like on a Tuesday night so it definitely would have pissed off a lot of the neighbours. Maybe leaves a bad taste in the mouth for them. But I was really interested to see: the next day I was just in the library, looking to the newspapers. The front page of the Parool said: is Amsterdam becoming more boring? That was the headline. And then they were interviewing these old squatter types, like Duivenpoep and stuff, and people were saying "yeah, Amsterdam is getting more boring. All the squats are getting evicted, people need to live, artists need a place. We need venues. People come to Amsterdam because it is interesting and we're losing on that." So, this eviction, which I'm really sure in England... You can have sympathetic stories in England, but I'm sure if you started throwing paint and stuff at the police on a Tuesday evening then you'd get slammed in the mainstream media. Actually, the Dutch mainstream media was kind of engaged with the discourse being presented and understood the anger of the squatters. And then it took it in this way that, to me, was pretty enlightened. So yeah, it's still possible. But that kind of comes back to what I was saying before: it might seem quite tangential, but to me it's kind of the same. I think people actually have to keep on squatting and have to just do their own thing. And then the mainstream media, the neighbours, the police... Everyone just takes their own position on what you're doing. But if you're doing something, like occupying a building because it's empty, where's the problem actually? And if people keep doing that, then who knows. Maybe the law would be repealed.

L: This reminds me of what someone said. Is squatting of all times?

L: I'm sorry?

I: He said squatting is of all times. There has been squatting throughout the entirety of history. That was a nice way of putting it to me. Again, to me, it represents this thing that it's really close to human nature. Like, "hey, there's something empty. Use it."

L: Yeah, but then of course if you're going global then you have to remember that the USA was squatted from native americans. Israeli squatters in Palestine at the moment are just completely robbing land from people who lived on that land for generations.

I: I never even thought of calling that squatting.

L: Yeah, yeah. If you go on twitter and search for squatting then you get a lot of Palestinian solidarity stuff, which I'm most of the time down with. But then they slag off Israeli squatters on Palestinian land. I mean I don't like Zionism. But squatting is a tool right. You've got right wing squatters in Italy. Not everyone squatting is a great person, then. So there's that. But I also agree: people have been squatting for a long time. All the land rights you have now are just established by someone powerful being there at the right time and then writing their own contract which now kind of enshrines the right of this person to own this building on this street, or something. But it's just bits of paper, right? It's all from nothing. The majority of the people in the world are squatting right now. Not in western Europe, where we live, but in the Majority World, in the slums. You know. Often there's rent deals and stuff, but a lot of people are squatting.

I: I think another interesting question to ask you would be whether you've seen changes in the kinds of people that squat nowadays?

L: That immediately makes me think of an insight from a friend of mine.

I: Well if you can tell me then I'd love to hear it.

L: Yeah, how to put it. Things have changed, because... By the time I was first squatting here, in like the early 2000s, squatting had kind of developed into a thing that predominantly young people could do while they were studying or kind of working out what they wanted to do with their life, or while they were living in the city for a couple of years. And they could do that very easily. There was access points through things like KSUs [kraakspreekuur, squatting advice hour] and people would say "could you help us squat this building?" and they'd get the help and be set up in a building. That, I think, in a way is great and should be tolerated, because it actually quite makes sense: housing getting provided for the people that need it. But of course also it lead to a situation where friends of mine, who would just squat a building, get their friend who could break buildings to come and squat a building and then put a lock on it and then go back a week later to see if the lock is still there. Of course that's one way to squat, but it's also kind of wasteful right? Because, to me, squatting is also about holding down a building when you're inside it. That's like what you have to do when you get the building. So I was rather shocked when my friend told me she just put a lock on the door. And then indeed the owner came, broke the lock and regained possession. That seems a bit lazy, you have to fight. But of course maybe that owner was a violent mafia bastard, so she saved herself a lot of grief. But I think people here had it quite good and there was kind of a right to squat and that right has been lost. That's really terrible. And what a friend of mine was saying is that, actually, the law kind of created... The law was kind of justified by this kind of media hysteria about foreign, dangerous,

threatening squatters, you know? Living off Dutch benefits. Coming here, stealing jobs. All this horrible pseudo-racist stuff. And the law was there to solve this problem. But, actually, in a way the what happens is that the law has made it so a lot of Dutch people thought “fuck this, I’ll live with my mom or I’ll live anti-squat.” So a lot of Dutch people have found other ways of doing it, but you’re still left with this residue of political people. Some of them foreign. So what I’m kind of leaning towards is that the law has kind of created it’s own enemy. It said “we’re going to stop this problem, because we’re attacking these people.” But now actually, the amount of people that are squatting has shrunk to the people that the law wanted to criminalize. Because these people, and I would include myself in this, don’t actually care about the law. I obviously don’t like having to deal with the legal system and putting myself on the line, because it’s this horrible thing to have to go through court cases. But I would be more than happy to get arrested for squatting and to justify in court why I was doing what I was doing. Because it’s just not the same as theft, murder or robbing someone. It’s an empty house. So for me, even when I’m talking about it I’m getting angry. It’s a really important thing. And there’s still a lot of people who would think that. And there’s still a lot of people who were doing it because it was an easy option, probably, but it’s definitely less easy. So criminalization has had an effect: it has changed who does squatting. But of course people drift into it from all these different angles and places. I think no one would say that the number of people squatting is going up at the moment. Criminalization is one of the main reasons for that, so yeah, it has changed things.

I: So, I had this one question prepared where I wanted to compare this kind of answer to a cost/benefit kind of thing. So what you basically were saying, if I understood correctly, is that for a lot of people the

costs have risen so much that they've decided to just not do it anymore? But then there's also this residue, that you mentioned earlier, for whom these costs are just completely not there?

L: I guess you could say it like that, but you maybe lose some of the complexities when you say it like that. Because every single person has their own cost/benefit analysis and I think... For example with foreign people squatting, I'm sure there were more foreign people squatting in the 1980s. Because there were maybe 30000 squatters in Amsterdam, 50000 in the country. Who knows? Shitloads of people. So for sure there were loads of foreigners squatting. Now there's still foreigners squatting, like myself, but people kind of target that and blame that. But I also know Dutch people squatting, so I don't... I don't agree with the rhetoric at all. It's true for me that the benefits outweigh the costs, but that's only one way of looking at it, I think. I've never made this calculation explicit in my head or something and there's a lot of people that just kind of drift into things. And drift out-, like, the guy that was living here with me for the first year when we squatted. He's now taken a social housing house in Rotterdam. He was squatting for most of his adult life with tekno soundsystems. He is a graphic designer. You know, doing his thing, finding his way. What do I want to say? For him that was just kind of what he did and he's kind of drifted out of it now, because he ended up living here and he was off grid and he didn't really like it. He wanted to have more computer time. And because he was squatting... Because, after an eviction 10 years ago, he got into a social housing list. He actually had a lot of points accumulated, because he's been technically homeless for 10 years. So he got a single person house quite fast. But is that... Did he lay out the costs and benefits? I don't know, I think it's more complicated than that. I think he got to the point where maybe he

also did a cost/benefit analysis on things like his age and his feeling, but it's also... If this squat had had electricity, I think he'd still be living here.

I: I guess the risk with this question is that, indeed, you're trying to put rational choice on everything, which is just not possible.

L: Yeah, I guess that's what I'm getting... I'm getting stuck a bit, yeah.

I: The point of it was that, for some people, there's definitely some kind of consideration. Like, "hey, is squatting perhaps an option?" I heard a story about a mom with three kids who was on a waiting list for a place and just couldn't find anything. I mean, it was in the 1990s I think, so it was easier, but still. She decided to squat for eight years or something, just as a solution.

L: Fair play.

I: Yeah, so I mean... Not entirely, but it is for a big part a rational choice thing. You can approach it that way, you know?

L: Yeah, but then... This was in the media?

I: No, this was a friend of a friend.

L: Ah, because I was going to say if it was in the media, maybe that was just a story she was telling. But maybe that is actually the real story, yeah.

[PEE BREAK]

L: I could say a lot about this law criminalising squatting. You know it has been reviewed recently in parliament?

I: Yeah I heard about that. How did that go actually?

L: Well, this is actually quite interesting, because the squatter's movement – whatever it is now – is active still. You know, they just made a new squatters' handbook in Amsterdam and released it and had like a media storm around it. And this Dilan Yesilgoz [PVV] person was like frothing at the mouth. "How can people release something that condones illegal acts..."

I: Yeah, yeah. I have it right here on my desktop.

L: Yeah. So, shit is still going on. But no one... There was a report evaluating the law and Van der Steur [wanker politician] said "thanks for this report, it shows nothing needs doing. We'll keep it as it is." Which is unbelievable, because if you look at the report... It's so funny. Like, the law's designed to regulate vacancy and one way to do that is to criminalize squatting, so that people who occupy vacant buildings can be kicked out faster so those buildings can be put to use again. As I understand it, that's the logic that's being used. If you look at the report the level of emptiness are going up by like a percent every year. Office spaces are at like 17%, shops at 9%. If you look at the long-term empties, like offices have been empty for more than 3 years, they are also going up. So clearly the law isn't working. And then they have statistics of how many people have been arrested for squatting. Arrested, but also charged and the punishment. These are all going up. Every year they're going up. And the report says "we can't explain this." I think it's because people are realizing the law is not working and then unfortunately there's some people getting caught. Of course what they don't talk about, because they don't know and they never have known, is how many squats there are. So, the figures were only until 2014, but in 2014 there were more than 200 arrests – which is way higher than

the previous years. And the figures are also fucked. Like, the police commissioner from Amsterdam said “these figures don’t make sense, they asked the wrong people, blablabla.” The point is: you could say, like, “more people are getting arrested, that means the law is working.” But it doesn’t mean that. It just means more people are realizing that, even though squatting is criminalized, they can still do it. And even if they get arrested they’re probably not going to get convicted. And of course, the number of other people doing it is exponentially rising. And that’s why maybe the arrests are going up. So basically, the report is saying “this law isn’t working” and, obviously I’m biased, but if I read it that’s the reading I get. Also, obviously politicians are wankers. So Van der Steur says “this confirms what I think”, so the whole process is useless. So yeah, I’ve got a lot to say on this, cause it’s clearly not working. On the regulation of vacancy, the report itself says that there are 7 out of the 400 municipalities in the Netherlands employing the possibilities to set up byelaws, to push owners to put buildings back into use. And it evaluates them and most of them say we don’t even do it. So there’s a very small fraction of councils using these pathetic laws to try and regulate vacancy, but the rule of private property is so strong that actually nothing is changing. So the law is not working. Obviously, it’s not going to get repealed. Because that doesn’t really happen, or, you know, it’s not going to happen soon. But it’s a joke really. But then also, what does it matter? Like, the law was brought in, there’s been this review of it, I’m sitting in a squat and I’m okay – touch wood – ‘til now. So in a way it is irrelevant as well. People should just keep on doing it, because the possibility is there and existing.

I: So for squatters then it’s not the most influential thing? The squatting and vacancy law?

L: Well, depends who you talk to. I spoke to one guy, I just bumped into him last year sometime, and he used to break a lot of buildings. He was part of the KSU, but definitely just interested in breaking, non-political. And he said to me: as soon as squatting was criminalized, he stopped. Because he didn't want to get a criminal record. And I said "yeah, but almost no one has been convicted." And he said "yeah, but some people did." So for him... He's - I don't want to say apolitical or non-political, because people are political in different ways. But his form of politics involved doing something until the point you could get criminalized for it and then, for whatever reason - it's probably because he wants to go into social work or something and he doesn't want to get a criminal record - he thought fuck this. Also, maybe cause he'd been breaking buildings for 10 years and he's like "I have to do something else with my life." Who knows. For this guy, criminalization had a huge effect. One of his breaking buddies is still squatting and they're in Rotterdam and they're like negotiating with Woonstad [social housing corporation] to buy their buildings. Woonstad should be kicking them out, right? Woonstad should be saying "you're squatters, get the fuck out so we can sell this building and make up all the money that our fucking bosses defrauded us of." But they're good mates with them. Cause they've squatted there for five years, maybe longer. I think it was squatted before criminalisation [in 2010]. But yeah, they're there. If they weren't there then the buildings would get broken into and burn, or whatever. Who knows. There's some kind of relationship between the squatters and the housing corporation. And the negotiations as far as I last heard were just based on the fact, like, would Woonstad do the foundations before they sell all the buildings to them [...]. And if they do the foundations then squatters have to trust them, cause then they have to leave and come back. Do the squatters actually want to own the property?

That's also a thing for them. So that's the situation where the law says one thing, but actually the reality is quite different. But then I think the important thing for me is about the world in which you can operate. So it is still possible to squat, but a lot of people think that it's not or they think the costs and benefits have kind of flipped, then. That's really tragic, because the amount of emptiness – at least of non-residential buildings – is going up. But there aren't actually people wanting to occupy them. They'd rather live anti-squat, which is generally not a particularly good idea. A lot of people maybe think anti-squat is a good idea and then they do it and they get fucked over.

I: How exactly would they get fucked over? In the way that uhh “fuck it, you have to leave now”, or...?

L: Yeah, I mean... The most common complaint, or a common complaint I hear from people who anti-squat, is that they weren't offered another house when they had to leave. So then somehow, even though that's never in the contract, they think that if they leave they should get a new place. Of course that's not what happened. And also, I read in the media that sometimes anti-squatters are moaning because they have to leave their place, because migrants want to live there. Well, yeah, sorry. Sorry you used to live alone in a gym on your own and now you have to leave for like 50 people from a warzone to live there. But then also, people have been told to leave because they went on holiday and then they went back and then stuff has been moved from the house because they signed a contract that said they wouldn't be away for more than three days. People have been kicked out because they had pets. Also parties... Parties is a bit different maybe. I also know people that, like...

I: Really like to party?

L: Yeah. [Laughter] They took an anti-squat in the old telephone exchange, right next to the central library on Blaak in Rotterdam. And they got the keys Friday, they partied on Saturday and they had been kicked out by Sunday. That's like... Not really respectful but also kind of funny. But the problem... Anti-squat, in a way, is a really clever capitalist recommodification of squatting. Because it takes all the edginess and the precarity and sort of bundles it up and says "you just have to pay 200 euros a month." And, you know, you have this big building. So people just do it, because it is a good option.

I: Nowadays they actually do pay more than 200 euros a month a person.

L: Yeah sure and that's legally dubious, because obviously you're not paying rent. You're paying the administration costs. So it's actually really dubious, what they're doing. And it's kind of interesting that it has not been challenged legally. But then also they took a really long time to criminalize squatting, so maybe I should not complain about the legal process going slowly.

I: Well... You've already done double the talking of any of the other interviews. [Laughter] So I'm just going to ask one last question and then we can just wrap it up and go outside again. Would you say there are any unintended consequences to the law, both for... Uhm... You mentioned earlier, with the whole report and everything, that they actually managed to... Well, the numbers were actually showing that there's possibly just more people squatting, because more people getting arrested and...

L: Yeah, it's how you interpret the numbers, but that would be my interpretation.

I: True. That would be an unintended consequence, right? Can you think of anything like that for them?

L: Who's them, the elites?

I: The elites, the police, the state. I can imagine that the law makes things potentially more complicated.

L: Yeah, sure. You can sort of separate out into different groups. I think, for the police, especially the Amsterdam police and, of course, being the capital... This was were a lot of battles played out around the law change, with the most active squatters' movement being in Amsterdam. But the police immediately jumped on this and had pressured it with all this bullshit about booby-traps and stuff. But the police, they wanted to be the judge basically. They wanted to be able to evict when they said so. And that's what was happening in the beginning, until the legal changes set it to "the owner has to take you to court" and kind of regulate it in that way. So it was an unintended consequence of the law that the police would behave basically against human rights. And now it is an unintended consequence for the cops that... If you look at what Leen Schaap [wanker cop] said, he's basically saying that he wants the law to go further, because he's not happy. Because what the police wanted was just to be able to just kick the shit out of squatters and then protect private property. Fuck knows why they're interested in that when they could be doing anything else, but that's what they wanted and they haven't got that. So for the police, it hasn't really worked out I would say. For the judiciary it's probably quite useful, because now they've got a specific charge with which they can imprison people with. So I guess maybe they're happy. For the state... That's... Levels of the state... Politically... I don't follow politics, so I don't know what happened for example to

Slob [another wanker politician].

L: That's a long time ago, but, alright...

E: Is he gone? I don't know. Maybe Slob and whoever the other... Tenhoven? [these pricks pushed the anti-squatting law] Maybe, you know, that would have benefited them personally? I don't know. Did it benefit their parties? Maybe. Because they've been trying to get into this whole cracking down on civil rights bullshit. So maybe that benefited the political elite. But I actually don't really know, cause... It's not really that interesting to consider this for me.

I: Yeah, but you can't really say that any of the problems... I mean, it's disputable whether there are problems. That depends on your perspective I guess. But you can't really say that any of the problems for any of the parties have been solved, then? I mean, besides the judicial system being able to put a charge or a specific prosecution...

E: I mean, it's complicated, because the law was brought in explicitly to combat vacancy. So in that way, it completely failed. I mean, everyone should be able to see that. But, of course, implicitly I think there were other processes at work. Like... Attacking the right to protest, general normalization of society. Say, giving another means to repress countercultural and antagonistic social movements. I mean, it's a huge attack on the radical left. Because, this is what squatters... Like, some Dutch squatters came to England to talk about the criminalization of squatting in the Netherlands when they were talking about the criminalization of squatting in the UK, which happened around 2012. And they said "we kind of got lazy. We didn't realize... Because people living in squats were doing migrant solidarity and punk shows and organizing demonstrations we kind of forgot to protect

our living spaces.” Which... I don’t know how it could take so long to realize that to be honest. But, yeah, we’re talking about bigger forces I guess. So in that way it has been a huge attack on social movements more generally, because a lot of infrastructure is being destroyed. And you’ve still got a lot of places here that were legalized in the 1980s and 1990s and that gives the scene quite a lot of strength. But it would be pretty hard to have... As these places go, they don’t get replaced, right? Culturally that’s really devastating. So, talking about unintended consequences... I think cities are getting really boring. Rotterdam is becoming more boring. Now we’re talking about, like, urban cycles and really huge processes of decline, decay and renewal. Squatting is a very small part of that. But for me, personally, I see the changes in what I’m into. You know, like, experimental music, cheap cafés, underground bars, stuff like that. Places where I want to go out, they don’t really exist now. So that makes me think maybe I should move to Belgium or eastern Europe or something. There’s probably a lot of people thinking that way, so in that way that’s really affecting the population. The culture. And is that an unintended consequence or an intended consequence? That’s hard to say. Then you’re really getting into almost conspiracy theories. Like, how much did people really think about what they were doing? In the UK, did they criminalize squatting because they knew that the housing crisis was going to get worse and they wanted to remove an option for people to self-organize? Especially knowing in the 1970s and 1980s the squatters were really united, yeah? We were talking about that before and then everyone thought we were kind of crazy. And then afterwards I kind of saw the same discourse in The Guardian [English newspaper]. So who knows? There’s intelligent people in positions of power thinking on the level that we can’t really comprehend. [...] I’ve studied it for a while and my feeling is that it’s this sort of creeping normalization.

And you said that other people said that as well, so I'm happy people see it. But I mean, how do you fight that? There's people in power who are thinking 50 years ahead probably, because they've got the money and the resources to do stuff like that. I also wanted to say, there's also other unintended consequences, also in the squatters' movement. For example, I remember talking to one guy who used to be quite involved in the Amsterdam squatters' movement – and now he's bought a house with his girlfriend. He said to me... I said it's really terrible that squatting's going to get criminalized. I think this was in 2008? And then he said "no, no! It's an opportunity for the squatters' movement. We're gonna have to fight. That's a good thing." Something like this. I don't know if he actually believed that or if he was just framing it, you know, to try and sound positive. But if people actually thought "great, this is the time for confrontation coming" then that never happened, right? Like, there was almost... It was kind of with a whimper. The demo in Utrecht, the demo in Amsterdam. I was in the UK and I was really sad to see... I was not... I'm always expecting all the people who have squatted houses in the past and are still living in them to like come out and fight. To get on the streets and be like "this can't happen." Never happened, so... In that way, maybe that's another unintended consequence. Maybe people feel things without actually... People felt angry, but they didn't...

I: Everyone kind of counting on it working out in the end, so it didn't.

L: Yeah, I don't know...

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LINKS

Enough is Enough - reports about anti-capitalist and anti fascist actions
<https://enoughisenough14.org>

Many films about squatting
<https://video.squat.net/>

Mapping social centres of the past in Western Europe
<https://maps.squat.net>

News about squatting around the world
<https://www.reddit.com/r/squatting/>
<https://planet.squat.net/>

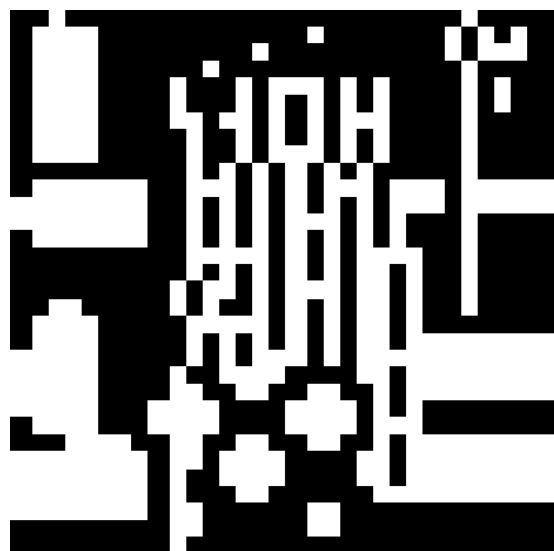
Radar – Squatted event agenda
<https://radar.squat.net/en>

Squatters Scrapbook – archive of squatter documents
<https://archive.org/details/squattersscrapbook>

Trespass – multi-language, open access journal about squatting
<https://www.trespass.network/>

Using Space – places to get pdfs of issues
<https://archive.org/search.php?query=using%20space>
<https://cobblebooks.wordpress.com/>
<https://en.squat.net/books/> (plus a whole lot more)

Vault - archive of all the public sites hosted on / helped by S!N in the past
<https://vault.squat.net/>



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